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FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR JYAPHE

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SUBJECT: WHO'S THE BOSS IN ABYAN? SOUTHERN MOVEMENT, AQAP,  
ROYG DUKE IT OUT IN A LAWLESS LAND

REF: A. SANAA 1310  
[B](#). SANAA 1892  
[C](#). SANAA 1679

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (S) SUMMARY. In the largely ungoverned spaces of Yemen's southern governorates, a complex political battle is taking place between the central government, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and members of the secessionist Southern Movement. This struggle is especially apparent in Abyan, where Sana'a's reach is negligible and former (and possibly current) jihadist Tariq al-Fadhli has emerged as the governorate's strongman. Southerners eager to gain their independence and convince the international community of their righteous cause could prove valuable allies in the fight to stamp out al-Qaeda in the southern governorates. END SUMMARY.

ALL EYES ON ABYAN  
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[2](#). (S) Former regime insider turned Southern Movement leader Tariq al-Fadhli's April defection has made Fadhli's home governorate of Abyan a focal point of movement activity as well as anti-government violence. Fadhli appears to be locked in a battle ) one which he seems to be winning ) with the ROYG over control of Abyan, long considered one of Yemen's most ungoverned territories. As Fadhli has openly challenged the ROYG for dominance, he has won the allegiance of dozens of local sheikhs and arguably become the most powerful figure in Abyan. "Tariq has become even more powerful by defecting. He's now a celebrity," director of local think tank Center for Future Studies Faris al-Saqqaf told PolOff on October 6. In late July, bloody clashes took place between movement supporters and security services in the Abyan capital of Zinjibar; direct fire was exchanged between Fadhli's compound and the nearby governor's office (Ref A). More deadly clashes between Fadhli's followers and security forces occurred in late September and early October, including an alleged assassination attempt on Abyan's Political Security Organization (PSO) chief, also the brother of Vice President Abdurabu Hadi Mansour. Deputy Speaker of Parliament Mohammed Ali al-Shadadi and MP Salem Mansour al-Haydare, both from Abyan, told PolOff on October 21 that there was virtually no ROYG presence in the governorate. "There are no laws. If someone commits a crime, it goes unpunished. The government has a small presence in Zinjibar, and that's it." Adeni businessman Mohammed Ali Hussein Abdullah told PolOff on October 26, "Tariq is pretty much running things in Abyan. Government officials don't go out in the streets. The governor only goes into his office when he absolutely has to."

[3](#). (S) Figuring out Fadhli's personal proclivities is essential to demystifying the complex relationship between the ROYG, Southern Movement and al-Qaeda in the Arabian

Peninsula (AQAP) in Abyan and the southern governorates. (Note: Fadhli, who fought with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in the 1980s and has maintained close ties with the extremist community in Yemen, is also the brother-in-law of regime insider and Northwest Regional Commander Major General Ali Muhsen al-Ahmar. End Note.) According to Editor-in-Chief of Aden-based al-Tariq newspaper Ayman Nasser, who has extensive contacts in the Southern Movement, Fadhli has cut all ties to Ali Muhsen and President Saleh. As recently as 2008, Fadhli sat on a "special committee" with Ali Muhsin, Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Rashad al-Alimi and unnamed "jihadists" tasked by Saleh with maintaining relations with Yemen's extremist community, according to businessman Salman al-Mashdali, who speaks regularly with Fadhli. Now, Fadhli is reportedly willing to betray the regime by revealing his checkered past with Saleh and Yemeni extremists, perhaps inspiring his placement at the top of a list of AQAP members in an October 26 editorial in official al-Thawra newspaper. (Note: The list also included well-known AQAP members Nasser al-Wahishi and Qassim al-Rimi, among others. End Note.) Members of the Southern Movement no longer question Fadhli's affiliations. Shadadi said that despite Fadhli's past transgressions, he is now "a peaceful man," demonstrated by the fact that he lives in his Zinjibar compound with his four wives and dozens of children. Other reports, however, indicate that Fadhli is building up a tribal militia to confront the regime (Ref B). Human Rights Watch researcher Christoph Wilcke, who had a lengthy telephone conversation with Fadhli in mid-October, told PolOff on October 26, "There are clearly elements within the movement that have a propensity for violence. We noticed this especially in our conversation with Tariq."

#### AQAP: BREEDING ON SOUTHERN SOIL

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14. (S) A number of factors ) including lawlessness, a prevailing anti-government attitude, a large population of mujahideen from Afghanistan and perhaps even ROYG complicity ) have combined to make Yemen's southern governorates (particularly Abyan, Shebwa and Aden) a fertile breeding ground for AQAP. Referring to the south's history of moderate Sunni Islam and high level of interaction with foreign cultures, Shadadi said, "Culturally, the south is not a good environment for AQAP. However, geographically, it is well-suited, and with the increasing desperation among southerners, it is becoming easier for them to recruit." Abyan's deteriorating security situation and small ROYG presence have enabled AQAP to set up training camps and safehouses across the governorate, according to political leaders from Abyan. Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) Secretary General Yassin Said Noman told PolOff on October 25, "Al-Qaeda isn't just in Abyan. They're all over the south ) in Aden, too. The youth are desperate, which makes it a very, very dangerous situation." In October conversations in Aden and Sana'a, movement members and political observers worried that the south's increasingly desperate youth population would turn to more violent forms of confrontation with the ROYG ) to include cooperation with AQAP - as the Southern Movement's peaceful efforts do not produce results (Ref C). (Note: AQAP issued a statement in support of the movement earlier this year, although it was immediately rejected by the movement's leadership. End Note.) An increasing Salafi presence has also facilitated connections between religious extremists and southern youth. Nasser described a hard-line Salafi institute in Furaish (Lahj governorate) founded by Muqbil Wadi disciple Abdulrahman Murai, which sends its (mostly southern) students to study at the hyper-conservative Dammaj Institute in Sa'ada.

15. (S) Southern Movement members and sympathizers allege that, through security operations in the northern AQAP strongholds of Marib and Jawf and secret talks with AQAP leadership, the ROYG is pushing AQAP into the southern governorates, allegedly to weaken security and, by drawing a link between AQAP and the Southern Movement, convince the international community of the southerners' propensity for

violence. President Saleh told the Ambassador on October 26 that, because the U.S. had acted too slowly on proposed CT cooperation, AQAP elements had moved en masse out of Marib and Jawf and "are now gathering in Abyan." On the other hand, the ROYG has accused the Southern Movement of instigating violence and repeatedly points to Fadhli's extremist ties as evidence of the movement's nefarious aims. YSP Aden Chief Ali Munasser told PolOff on October 12, "AQAP is still largely a tool of the government. They are planning to use them at the right time, as they always have. I'm 100 percent sure that the government is supporting these jihadist groups to oppose the movement." Although the belief that President Saleh's government cooperates closely with al-Qaeda is widespread, evidence is scarce. On October 12, Nasser gave PolOff documents from late 2008 and early 2009 that allegedly show 32 "known jihadists" seeking a presidential pardon for their extremist activity in exchange for government favors; the documents also allegedly prove that each was given land in Aden on the orders of Vice President Mansour. (Note: Topping the list of names of land recipients is Abyan-based AQAP member Sami Dayan. Dayan also appeared on the October 26 al-Thawra list of known AQAP members published by the ROYG. End Note.)

#### BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS

16. (S) At least some southerners recognize the danger of allowing AQAP to set up camp in their territory, especially as they work to achieve independence from the north. In meetings with PolOff, southerners described in detail alleged AQAP cells in Abyan, which they say are a mutual threat to southerners and the U.S. Movement sympathizer Shadadi said, "I told (the tribes in Abyan), either it's kick out al-Qaeda now, or it will be the planes bombing your houses later." Shadadi, Adeni businessman Abdullah and Shebwa MP Ali Yaslim Bawda al-Himyari told PolOff on October 26 about a campaign they began in late October to convince Abyan sheikhs to reject al-Qaeda. They described a competition for the allegiance of local tribesmen, waged between AQAP and local leaders ) mostly Southern Movement sympathizers - who eschewed the violence of al-Qaeda because of its detriment to the southern cause. Shadadi said the campaign had so far been successful, but added, "The problem is that development must go hand-in-hand with the campaign against al-Qaeda. We

have to give (the sheikhs) something in return." Without any government presence, southern sheikhs struggle to control their territory. Abdullah said that local leaders in Lawdar (Abyan) asked him for help in controlling the area, which has become "dominated by extremist elements." Businessman Mashdali told PolOff, "I'm afraid that in the future, southerners will increasingly turn to violence. These people are desperate, and they are easily susceptible to AQAP or whoever."

#### COMMENT

17. (S) For several months now, Southern Movement leaders have claimed that Abyan ) the southern governorate most outside of Sana'a's control - will prove a test case for their cause. If movement leaders hope to keep their campaign peaceful and gain support from the international community, they will have to work hard to convince fickle sheikhs and disaffected youth across the south to reject al-Qaeda. The success of the anti-AQAP campaign and ultimate outcome of the three-way turf battle in Abyan is likely to hinge on Tariq al-Fadhli's decisions. Should strong southern leaders show a commitment to eradicating AQAP in their territory, they could prove valuable allies for the USG as long as their agenda steers clear of secession. END COMMENT.

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